

Guidance on conducting an oral examination by video link (MPhil and doctoral degrees)

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Research Office Graduate Education Team

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document provides information on policy and procedural issues at the University of Manchester in relation to the oral examination of postgraduate research degrees by video link. The degrees covered by this document are: Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Doctor of Engineering (EngD), Doctor of Enterprise (EntD), Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Doctor of Medicine (MD), Master of Surgery (ChM) and all professional doctorates and higher doctorates. This guidance document should be used in conjunction with the main examination policy documents.
- 1.2 It is a requirement for the examination of postgraduate research degrees that each member of the examining panel, namely the internal examiner, external examiner/s, candidate and, if applicable, independent chair, is present at the oral examination and that it is conducted in a room occupied by the University of Manchester. In very exceptional circumstances, however, the oral examination may be conducted by video link with the permission of the Faculty Associate Dean for Graduate Education to enable a member of the examining panel or the candidate to undertake the examination away from the University.
- 1.3 Each application for examination by video link should be considered on a case by case basis. Candidates are advised that returning to their home country will not normally be considered grounds for permitting an oral examination to be conducted by video link as it is a requirement that candidates make themselves available to attend an oral examination as part of the examination process.
- 1.4 A request to conduct an oral examination by video link should be considered only if circumstances make it impossible for a candidate to be in Manchester within the required timeframe, or if this is the only means by which an appropriate examiner could undertake the examination. The reasons should fully justify the examination being held by video. For example; the examiner's expertise is unique and s/he is unable to travel to Manchester within the required time-frame.
- 1.5 All parties must be provided with this guidance prior to submitting a formal request, and the benefits and difficulties of the technology should be highlighted. No pressure should be put on any party to assent to the oral examination being carried out by video link.
- 1.6 The quality of the equipment to be used by the remote party must be taken into account when agreeing and arranging the video link.
- 1.7 If an oral examination by video link is held, the examiners must ensure that the supervisor is available on the day of the oral examination in person or by telephone, to answer any questions or concerns relating to the candidate's research.
- 1.8 Although video conference facilities are free within the University of Manchester this is not true across the sector. Additional costs should be identified with any partner university/organisation. Any additional costs associated with holding the oral examination by video link must be met by the appropriate School.

- 1.9 The oral examination taking place by video link is not grounds for appeal. Should technical difficulties occur and the oral examination be cancelled through these difficulties, a second oral examination must be arranged, but this eventuality will not be grounds for an appeal.

2. Video link facilities

Within the University of Manchester there are three main types of video conference technologies suitable for oral examination purposes. Modern systems enable participants to engage in real discussions, the picture quality is excellent and voice delays rarely occur. Real time sharing of graphics and data is also possible.

Administrators should work closely with technical staff to decide which is the most suitable system for the candidate.

- i. **Video conference:** Media Services offers a free*, supported video conferencing service to all University based internal staff and students (i.e. internal examiners, supervisors and candidates).

Three suites are available in the Humanities Bridgeford St, Roscoe and Renold building giving coverage of the entire campus.

The systems are capable of full IP based conferencing via H323, multi-point conferencing and high definition and conferences with ISDN systems can be bridged via JANET. **Please note that these systems are only designed to connect with other such systems and are incompatible with web software systems such as Skype, MSN Messenger and G-Chat.**

*outside of operational hours, (9-5), staff support is chargeable.

Full details about this service are available at:

<http://www.mediaservices.manchester.ac.uk/index.php/services/video-conferencing/vc-facilities>

Technical staff will set up the booking and system for the oral examination. Email Media Services to book a video conference: mediaservicesvc@manchester.ac.uk

Key points/features:

- Candidates need to be aware that in a video conference environment, the system is voice activated and the camera pans to whoever is speaking or making a noise. The microphone has to be switched off by the person who is not talking to avoid the camera focussing on the wrong person when unexpected background noise occurs off camera.
- Only two sites can be seen at once so a third examiner would be invisible unless talking.
- It is possible to share documents on this system including power point, spreadsheets, graphics and film.

- ii. **Access Grid:** there are several Access-Grid nodes across campus but the central team is based in the Kilburn Building.

Full details about this service are available at:

<http://www.rcs.manchester.ac.uk/services/accessgrid/> and www.agsc.ja.net

Key points/features:

- This system provides a virtual research environment where data can be viewed and shared and a whiteboard used to elucidate points.
- It is not voice activated and all parties are present on screen at the same time which is conducive to discussion.

iii. Desk-top video conferencing using Breeze: (also known as Adobe Connect).

Full details about this system are available at:

http://www.applications.itservices.manchester.ac.uk/show_product.php?id=244&tab=all

Email contact: connect-support@manchester.ac.uk

Key points/features:

- This system is dynamic and a little more like access grid than video conference. It requires a web-cam to be tested and available to both student and examiners. There is growing technical support for this system but it is perhaps best used by candidates and supervisors already familiar with the technology.

For systems i & ii, rooms need to be booked through technical staff. System iii requires a good PC with a reasonable sized screen and video cameras. It is advisable for administrative staff arranging the oral examination to discuss the pros and cons of each of the systems below with candidates, supervisors and technicians to decide which is best for the candidate's discipline and if there are particular requirements.

All of the systems require technical assistance from the University of Manchester and the external site. School administrators should not be expected to have full technical expertise. A technician should be available at each site to trouble shoot during the oral examination in case of technical difficulties.

3. Procedure for setting up the examination

The following procedure should be followed:

- i. The School must obtain preliminary approval from the Faculty Associate Dean for Graduate Education. The School, in consultation with the candidate, supervisor and examiners, must give reasons in writing (ie by email) for requiring the oral examination to be held by video.
- ii. If approval is given by the Faculty Associate Dean, the School should seek formal consent from the candidate, supervisor and examiners. Each individual must sign the consent form (see Appendix One). By signing this form, individuals are agreeing to the oral examination being conducted by video link. Reasons for the oral examination being held by video link must be provided on the form and each party must sign to state that they are aware of the potential limitations of holding the oral this way. If any individuals are overseas and unable to sign the document, they may give their agreement by email.

The consent form should be kept on file by the relevant School graduate office for a period of not less than seven years.

- iii. The video link facilities should be booked and sufficient time given for the oral examination to take place. Time should be allowed in advance of the oral examination for all parties to undertake a short training session. The video link should be set up at least one hour before the examination time in case there are any problems with the link set up.

Every effort should be made to ensure that possible overrunning can be accommodated. It is recommended that the video link facilities are booked for one hour beyond the anticipated length of the oral examination.

- iv. Booking of the remote site room and equipment has to be arranged by the person at that site. Staff at the remote site should contact their video conference /access grid staff and provide our contact details. Technical staff from each site will then communicate and set up the necessary booking. A technical member of staff should be available at the remote site in case of technical difficulties.
- v. Once the date has been fixed, procedures in the event of technical failure during the oral examination must be agreed. A second session should be booked as insurance.

4. Examination protocol

- i. Meticulous care should be taken to ensure that the candidate's examination is not compromised in any way.
- ii. If the examiners are at different sites, they must take account of their need to consult privately with each other before and after the examination.
- iii. If the candidate is the remote party, ideally, (s)he should be accompanied by an approved independent person, for example, a British Council representative or a member of academic staff at another institution. Any materials brought into the examination should be identified at the start. If the candidate is not in a video conference room in Manchester it is advisable to ask the technician to have the camera pan the room to ensure that everything is in order .
- iv. The candidate and the administrator must ensure that any visual material is given to the technical staff in good time to be uploaded onto the system.
- v. Technical staff should ensure that no distractions are on camera during the session, a background screen or blank wall is preferable.
- vi. The examining panel must arrive at the video conference room at least 20 minutes before the examination start time and all discussions should take place in the video conference environment (except during the final deliberations between examiners when the candidate is not present).

- vii. The oral examination must be chaired in Manchester and all participants welcomed from Manchester. The chair/internal examiner must check that the candidate feels comfortable with the system before the oral examination begins.
- viii. Where a voice activated system is used the chair must explain to the candidates and examiners the etiquette of the microphone on/off times.
- ix. Parties at each end of the video link must be able to see each other at all times because facial expression and body language provide important cues in an oral examination situation.

APPENDIX 1: Conducting an Oral Examination by Video Link Consent Form

Candidate name:

Candidate registration number:

Degree (eg: PhD, MPhil, EngD) and subject:

School:

Supervisor(s) name:

Examiners' names:

Brief reason for oral examination to be held by video link:

The costs associated with the video examination will be entirely covered by the School.

Before signing this form to agree to the oral examination being conducted by video link, please ensure that you are aware of potential difficulties which may occur while using a video link. For example:

- *there may be a break in the link mid-examination;*
- *that over long distances, scheduling the examination at a conventional time may be problematic;*
- *there may be some time delay that could slow the flow of discussion;*
- *the normal forms of cueing and interrupting do not work in the same way as in face to face contact, etc.*

NB: The oral examination taking place by video link will not be grounds for appeal. Should technical difficulties occur and the oral examination be cancelled through these difficulties a second oral examination must be arranged, but this eventuality will not be grounds for an appeal.

I hereby confirm that I have been made aware of any potential limitations of holding the oral examination by video link and agree to conduct the oral examination as such.

Candidate Signature:

(and print name)

Supervisor(s) Signature:

(and print name(s))

Internal Examiner(s) Signature:

(and print name(s))

External Examiner(s) Signature:

(and print name (s))

APPENDIX 2: Faculty and central graduate office contact details

NB: queries should be directed to the appropriate School Office within the relevant Faculty in the first instance. For School Graduate Office contact details, contact the Faculty Graduate Office or consult the University website: <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/structure/academic/>

Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences

Postgraduate Research Administrator
Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences
C4, Sackville Street Building
The University of Manchester Sackville Street
Manchester M60 1QD
Tel 0161 306 9191

Faculty of Humanities

Senior Postgraduate Administrator
Faculty of Humanities
Devonshire House
The University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
Tel: 0161 306 1119

Faculty of Life Sciences

Graduate Administrator
Faculty of Life Sciences
Simon Building
Brunswick Street
The University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
Tel: 0161 275 5444

Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences

Graduate Education Manager
Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences
3rd Floor, Simon Building
Brunswick Street
The University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
Tel: 0161 275 5024

Central Graduate Office

Graduate Education Team
Research Office
The University of Manchester
2nd Floor, Christie Building
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
Tel: 0161 275 8790